

## “Lord Jesus Values”

John 20:1-18

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The Resurrection of the Lord +++ Easter Sunday

Mary Magdalene stood weeping outside the tomb. “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” A man she thinks is the gardener calls her by name. She recognizes him. “Rabbouni!” She hastens the other disciples and jubilantly declares: “I have seen the Lord!”

Notice how she addresses Jesus: “My Lord.” “Rabbouni,” which means “Teacher,” or more specifically, “my teacher.” He’s not just *the* Lord; he’s *her* Lord. He’s not just *the* Teacher; he’s *her* Teacher. Her devotion is not at all surprising, given that Jesus had cast not one, not two, but *seven* demons out of her (Mark 16:9; Luke 8:2). She was one of the people Jesus had helped the most. Her realization that Jesus was *alive*, that he had defeated the powers of death, gave her tremendous hope. He could keep *healing*. He could keep *teaching*. He could keep inviting people to follow him, serve him, believe in him. Christ’s resurrection meant that *everything Jesus stood for* would still stand, that *his teachings* would not be forgotten, that *his values* would still be shared with anyone who would listen. The movement that he had begun would not die. Indeed, it was just beginning. This movement, which was first called “the Way” and later called “the church,” was dedicated to preserving and promoting *what Jesus stood for*; it was committed to spreading his *teachings* and sharing his *values*.

So what, exactly, did Jesus stand for? What, precisely, did he teach? What, truly, were his values? These are important questions, worthy of careful consideration, especially in our society today, where fewer people are going to church and fewer people seem to care. Has Jesus lost his relevance? Does what he stood for still matter? Does what he taught still make a difference? Are his values still important? I say: No, Jesus has definitely *not* lost his relevance; indeed, I believe we need to be paying attention to him now like we never have before. Yes, what he stood for *still* matters. Yes, what he taught *still* makes a difference. Yes, his values are still important, worthy of sharing very far and very wide.

What I want to do this morning is offer you a *summary* of Jesus’s Gospel message. I went back through all four of the Gospels, looking for themes and emphases that show up again and again. If someone were to ask me, “Could you tell me more about Jesus, what he stood for, what he taught, and what he valued,” this is what I would say. If someone were to ask me, “What do you think the *church* should stand for, what it should teach, and what it should value,” this is what I would say. Because we, the church, are called to carry on his ministry. We are the hands and feet of Jesus in the world today. People should be able to look at the church and see a reflection of Jesus: who he was, what he stood for, what he taught, and what he valued. These are things we need to know. These are things we need to *embody*. These are things we need to *lift up high*, for all the world to see. I see five primary themes.

First and foremost: Jesus wants us to have a deep and profound *love for God*. This, he said, was the greatest commandment of all: to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength (Matthew 22:37; Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27). Our spirituality, our devotion, our faith, is *more important than anything else* in our life. We see Jesus embodying this, climbing mountains and going to deserted places to pray by himself, and teaching his followers how to pray. He triumphs over the spiritual forces of evil during the forty days following his baptism, and then he frees many people – including Mary Magdalene – from the spiritual demons that were tormenting them. Jesus steadfastly listens for the will of God, even at that critical moment in the Garden of Gethsemane when he acknowledges that *his* will differed from *God's* will, yet he resolves to do *God's* will, no matter how much it will cost him. Jesus taught about the kingdom of heaven, encouraging his followers to seek that kingdom for themselves, and build it up in the world. He taught people how to understand the scriptures, liberating them from the narrow interpretations of religious leaders who liked to wield power and look important. He taught people about the Holy Spirit, which would come to enliven his followers after he left this earth. In short, Jesus taught that having a *spiritual life* is more important than anything else, and he taught people how to *build* a spiritual life for themselves. Pray, resist evil, listen for the will of God in your own life, seek the kingdom of heaven, study the scriptures and endeavor to apply them, welcome the Holy Spirit and allow it to embolden your life. This is what Jesus stood for; this is what he taught; this is what he valued.

Second: Jesus wants us to have a deep and profound *love for other people*. The second greatest commandment, he said, is to “love your neighbor as yourself.” “I give you a new commandment,” he told his followers, “that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” (John 13:34) But don’t just love the people who love you. Love even *your enemies*. “Do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you; pray for those who mistreat you.” (Luke 6:27-28) Jesus embodies what such a love looks like: sharing the grace of God in word and deed with a very large number of people throughout his entire ministry; being the Good Shepherd who will never abandon any one of his sheep that goes astray or gets caught in brambles (Matthew 18:12; Luke 15:4); loving those who sincerely wanted to follow him, even if what they needed to do was very hard (Mark 10:21); getting down on his knees to wash his disciples’ feet (John 13:1-11); and, above all, willingly going to the cross to free us from sin, to restore our relationship with God, and to give us eternal life. Jesus is the perfect embodiment of love. He tells his disciples: “I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.” (John 13:15) “This is my commandment,” he repeats, “that you love one another as I have loved you.” (John 15:12) If you ever wonder how you should treat another person, remember the Golden Rule: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you.” (Matthew 5:12) That should be a guiding principle in *every* Christian’s life. How do *you* want to be treated by other people, in all circumstances? That is *exactly* how you should treat other people – in all circumstances. It is all, fundamentally, about love. Not hate. Not hurting, not name-calling, not bullying, not lying about other people or misrepresenting them, not seeking revenge. *None* of that. Jesus wants us to treat everybody, *all* people, with love. This is what he stood for; this is what he taught; this is what he valued.

Third: Jesus wants us to have a deep and profound *respect for the worth and dignity of every other person on this earth*, regardless of their country of origin, their native language, their skin color, their race or ethnicity, or any other worldly factor. This message was disturbing to many of Jesus’s hearers. When Jesus stood up in the synagogue in his hometown and told the people in his home congregation that God loves *foreigners* at least as much as God loves *Jews*, well, that message didn’t go over so well. They didn’t want to hear about a time when God helped a woman from *Sidon* and healed a

man from *Syria* instead of helping the Jewish people. The people in that synagogue should have known those stories; they were in their scriptures, in the books of Kings. But they were closed-minded and hard-hearted. They didn't want to hear a message about God's love for people *not like them*. In fact, they were so incensed that they literally tried to *kill Jesus*. That story is in Luke 4; if you don't know it, *please* read it. Jesus ministered to people in Tyre and Sidon – those were foreign cities. He healed the servant of a Centurion – a hated Roman. He healed the daughter of a Canaanite woman – one of the native inhabitants of the land, whose ancestors lived there long before any Jews ever did. Jesus healed a Samaritan man with a skin disease, he ministered to a Samaritan woman at a well, and he told a story about a Samaritan who cared for a man who had been beaten on a dangerous road, while Jewish leaders passed right on by. The Jews, by and large, *despised* the Samaritans; they considered them half-breeds and idolators, yet Jesus spent time ministering to Samaritans, and teaching that the people we most need to love are those we most despise. Who would that be for you? Who are the people *you* most need to learn how to love? This message was not popular; many Jews did not want to hear that they weren't as special as they thought they were, and that God loves *all* people. It even took the apostles a long time to understand this. Simon Peter finally gets it, in the tenth chapter in the book of Acts, after he realizes that God has spoken to a Roman Centurion. Simon Peter has an epiphany: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every people anyone who fears him and practices righteousness is acceptable to him." (Acts 10:34-35) *God shows no partiality*. None of us are more important than anybody else in the eyes of God. The grace and love of God are for *all* people, *everywhere*, and we, the church, as ambassadors of Jesus Christ, are called to spread that grace and love far and wide, including people who don't speak English, people who aren't white, people from Africa or Asia or the Middle East or Central or South America or anywhere else in the world, *and also* the native population of *this* land. *All* people are special in the eyes of God. This is what Jesus stood for; this is what he taught; this is what he valued.

Fourth: Jesus wants us to have a deep and profound *commitment to righteousness and justice*. Righteousness has to do with ethics; justice has to do with fairness and equity. Jesus blesses those who "hunger and thirst for *righteousness*" (Matthew 5:6) and those who "are persecuted for the sake of righteousness" (Matthew 5:10). He tells his hearers "unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:20) Jesus criticizes the religious leaders for neglecting "the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith" (Matthew 23:23) – notice that he names justice *before* he names faith. The time when Jesus got the most angry – and the most violent! – was when he overturned the tables of the money-changers in the temple. The issue wasn't that they were selling animals in the temple to be sacrificed; the issue was that they were charging *ridiculously* high prices, fleecing the poor to line their pockets. Jesus called them "robbers." Matthew, quoting Isaiah, says that one of Jesus's purposes was to "proclaim justice to the gentiles" and "bring justice to victory" (Matthew 12:18-21). When Mary is pregnant with Jesus, she declares that her son's coming means God "has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty." (Luke 1:52-53) Jesus cared about *personal righteousness*, upright living on a personal level; he also cared about *social justice*, fairness and equity in society. When the church was born, the first Christians generously shared their wealth and resources with one another; they "would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need." (Acts 2:45) "No one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.... There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet,

and it was distributed to each as any had need.” (Acts 4:32, 34-35) That is a *remarkable* degree of generosity and sharing. As time passed and the church grew, unfortunately, Christians stopped being quite *that* generous, stopped sharing quite so much. But we are still called to share very generously. Righteousness and justice: this is what Jesus stood for; this is what he taught; this is what he valued.

Fifth, and finally: Jesus wants us to deeply and profoundly *care for the poor and needy*. Jesus didn’t just say “Blessed are the poor in spirit” (Matthew 5:3); he also said, “Blessed are you *who are poor*” (Luke 6:20) and “Woe to you who are rich” (Luke 6:24). In his first sermon, when he describes his mission, the very first thing he says is that God has anointed him “to bring good news to the *poor*.” (Luke 4:18) When a rich man asks Jesus what he needs to do to have eternal life, Jesus acknowledges his devotion, but says there is one thing lacking: “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money *to the poor*, and you will have treasure in heaven.” (Matthew 19:21; Mark 10:21; Luke 18:22) Jesus teaches “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God” (Matthew 19:24; Mark 10:25) “Woe to you who are rich,” he says, “for you have received your consolation.” (Luke 6:24) If you are blessed with wealth, Jesus asks you to be *generous*. Use what God has given you to enrich the lives of those whose circumstances are quite different than yours. In Matthew 25, Jesus gives some specific examples. Feed the hungry. Give drink to the thirsty. Welcome the stranger. Clothe the naked. Care for the sick. Visit those in prison. “Just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine,” he says, “you did it to me.” (Matthew 25:40) Those who do these things will be blessed by God. Those who do not, will not. It is that simple. In the early years of the church, as the apostle Paul traveled around, he took up a collection to bring to the church in Jerusalem, which was dramatically poorer than the wealthy Greek churches. Not only are *individual* Christians called to bless other people with their wealth, but *whole churches* are as well. Care for the poor and needy: this is what Jesus stood for; this is what he taught; this is what he valued.

These are the five themes I see in the words and deeds of Jesus. Loving God. Loving *all* people. Respecting the dignity and worth of every person on earth, recognizing that we are *all* equally special in God’s eyes. Righteousness on a personal level, and justice in society. Care for the poor and needy. These are the things Jesus stood for. These are the things he taught. These are the things he valued. These are the things that Jesus calls us, both as individuals and as the church community, to do.

So I want to invite you. Those of you whom we don’t see very often, I invite you *join us* as we seek to do these things, carrying on the ministry of Jesus in word and deed. This past week, we donated 233 pounds of food to the Mason Food Bank. With your help, we could donate *so much more*. This year, 6% of our church’s budget is going straight out the door to organizations that provide care and support for various groups of people. With your support, we could give *so much more*. Help us. Help us live out the ministry of Jesus Christ here and now. Help us be the hands and feet of Jesus in our world today.

When Mary Magdalene encountered the risen Christ, *hope* dawned anew in her heart. She knew: *everything he had been doing, everything he had been teaching, everything he had been valuing*, would still be done, still be taught, still be valued. The ministry of Jesus Christ was alive and well. Once Jesus ascended into heaven, that ministry fell to *us*. So when we do these things, when we live out this calling, we proclaim, boldly, for all the world to see, that *Jesus still lives, Jesus still reigns. For Christ is risen. (He is risen indeed!) Christ is risen! (He is risen indeed!) Christ is risen! (He is risen indeed!)*

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